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STATEMENT BY THE INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION OF CONSUMERS UNIONS

1. The International Organization of Consumers Unions (IOCU) is a federation of consumer organizations with members in approximately 70 countries, both developing and industrialized. IOCU links the activities of its members through research, information, education and advocacy. It represents consumer interests at international forums such as UNICEF.

2. IOCU is a founding member of the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN), a world-wide coalition of health, consumer, women's and development groups that are fully autonomous in their activities but share findings and information with each other.

3. Consumption involves more than just eating and drinking. Over the past 15 years, the work of IOCU has concentrated increasingly on health matters, such as the need for essential drugs, the oversupply of dangerous, ineffective and unnecessary medicines, the criminal promotion and sponsorship activities of tobacco companies. In conjunction with IBFAN, IOCU has specialized in pursuing the implementation of the World Health Organization (WHO)/UNICEF International Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes at all levels and in all countries.

4. IOCU welcomes the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Indeed, there is no nobler cause than taking concrete action to protect basic human rights, and especially the rights of the child. The Convention calls on States Parties to ensure that all segments of society are informed of the advantages of breast-feeding, thus reconfirming the spirit and intent of the WHO/UNICEF International Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes adopted in 1981. Every day, 3,000 to 4,000 babies die because they are denied the protection brought by breast-feeding.

5. The protection, promotion and support of breast-feeding are as essential now as they were in 1979 when WHO and UNICEF convened the extraordinary meeting on infant and young child feeding that actively involved the third system, i.e., non-governmental organizations. Although much has been achieved, if we do not continue to push ahead and consolidate the gains, a slide backwards will be inevitable. In our experience, one weakness has been that most Governments have not yet established a central point for all information on Code implementation and other measures to promote breast-feeding.

6. IOCU wishes to congratulate those Governments that have implemented the Code in full. Much appreciation also goes to the high-level policy makers who drew up the Innocenti Declaration last July. This Declaration is a vital new political commitment to breast-feeding and its operational targets are ambitious and achievable. IOCU has already started activities to help reach the Innocenti Declaration targets.

7. IOCU, in cooperation with other members of IBFAN, has assisted a number of Governments in establishing codes based entirely on the International Code and not just regulations covering labelling and quality as is still the case in many countries.

8. IBFAN is proud and honored to present to this Executive Board the results of its recent monitoring surveys on Code implementation. This is the fourth time that IBFAN and IOCU have published the state of the Code by country and the state of the Code by company. This year marks the tenth anniversary of the adoption of the Code and hence is a special occasion. We have worked overtime to collate and analyse all the necessary information and to bring you these results in time for the Executive Board meeting.

9. The state of the Code by country shows what 169 Governments have or have not done to implement the Code adopted by them 10 years ago. Countries are graded on a scale of 1 to 9. The best position is that of the entire Code passed as national law and, unfortunately, only nine countries have taken that step. The so-called voluntary Code is given a lower grade, but may be as good as law if properly implemented and monitored; 12 countries are in that position. In 28 countries, laws have been adopted that cover only some of the Code's provisions. In 29 others, draft codes are recommended and quite a few are gathering dust. No action at all has been taken by 19 Governments. The six countries that have an industry code, i.e. one drafted by the baby food industry, are probably in the worst position, since such codes tend to legitimize practices that are not permitted under the International Code because they undermine breast-feeding.

10. The state of the Code by Company reveals some improvement in Code compliance compared to 1988 when the previous world-wide survey was carried out. This year, hundreds of IBFAN researchers covered marketing practices in 79 countries, a truly impressive record. We surveyed 21 baby food companies and 19 manufacturers of bottles and teats.

11. Each of the marketing practices monitored was scrutinized according to specific articles of the Code, a strictly legal text exercise. However, the research shows that, while some companies have changed a few practices to suit Code requirements, many baby food companies are not complying with the spirit and aims of the Code, which was adopted as a means to protect and promote breast-feeding. Marketing practices change constantly and industry finds new promotion techniques that actually replace breast-feeding or discourage it. They can do so legally in most countries because Governments have not taken legal steps to stop such practices or do not strictly implement their laws.

12. Since the adoption of the Code in 1981, new kinds of baby foods and new marketing practices have appeared that were not contemplated at the time the Code was drafted. A few examples will illustrate this situation.

(a) Follow-up milks were hardly known in 1981 and are not mentioned specifically in the Code. Ten years later nearly every company has launched one or more of these milks in an attempt to widen the market and avoid Code restrictions. Although UNICEF and WHO state that "children should continue to be breast-fed ... for up to two years of age or beyond" and many mothers do continue to breast-feed beyond six months, much of the fierce promotion for follow-up formulas explicitly and implicitly claims that after a baby is four months old it is "normal" to replace breast milk with a follow-up formula;

(b) The range of so-called specialized formulas has expanded enormously and so has the promotion, especially to health workers, giving the impression that lactose intolerance and other "special conditions" are the lot of most babies;

(c) Health care facilities are still being used extensively for the distribution of industry-produced booklets and other information materials that are usually no more than advertisement in disguise. Few hospitals and professionals realize the subtlety of the messages. Much of this industry-sponsored material is actually disinformation that leads mothers to doubt their ability to breast-feed, which is the worst possible start.

13. Most baby food manufacturers also continue to act as though the Code was meant for developing countries only and continue advertising and promoting aggressively in industrialized countries. However, many of the parents' magazines and other literature from industrialized countries are sold or given out in the third world, and many health workers from there are trained in Europe or America. Industrialized countries are followed as role models in infant feeding as in other matters, quite apart from the fact that babies in the industrialized world have the same right to be protected from aggressive marketing as babies elsewhere. Supplies of infant formula donated to hospitals need to be stopped in all countries and unequivocally.

14. In order to protect breast-feeding, national laws need to be more flexible and focus more on marketing practices that discourage breast-feeding rather than on products that industry is constantly changing. That is where UNICEF, WHO and other organizations can act, by helping Governments draft

sound legislation and adopt effective policies to protect and promote breast-feeding.

15. We realize, however, that not only does breast-feeding need to be protected by legislation and other means, but also the mothers who breast-feed need to be supported in very concrete ways. Social infrastructures that encourage breast-feeding need to be created. This may mean effective implementation of maternity legislation in some places, to compulsory crèches in all factories in others and imaginative solutions to the real problems of women in the informal sector elsewhere.

16. We welcome the Innocenti Declaration and are glad to be part of the World Alliance for Breast-feeding Action (WABA), a new global, action-oriented initiative created just two months ago, with the aim of achieving the goals of that Declaration. The IOCU regional office in Penang, Malaysia, is presently acting as the WABA secretariat. What needs to be stressed is that WABA intends to expand and reinforce existing activities in support of breast-feeding.

17. If we want to succeed in discouraging bottle-feeding and create a new, global breast-feeding culture, as the Innocenti Declaration aims to do, we need a new political and financial commitment from Governments and agencies such as UNICEF and WHO, as well as donors.

18. Last February UNICEF called on NGOs to make their contribution. They are ready to act but need your backing. IOCU and its affiliated groups will continue to fight for the most basic of all consumer rights: the right to adequate nutrition for the most vulnerable of all consumers, our infants.